

from  
project to  
platform

## THE EVOLUTION OF KIDS COUNT

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION





## KIDS COUNT: A QUARTER-CENTURY EVOLUTION

- 1989** • Casey Foundation makes a five-year commitment to KIDS COUNT
- 1990** • Center for the Study of Social Policy, on behalf of the Casey Foundation, publishes the first edition of the national *KIDS COUNT Data Book* with 10 indicators of child well-being
- 1991** • The first eight state-level organizations receive KIDS COUNT grants
- 1993** • Management of KIDS COUNT formally transferred from the Center for the Study of Social Policy to the Casey Foundation
- 1996** • Fifty state-level grantees comprise the KIDS COUNT network
- 2000** • KIDS COUNT network steering committee formally established
- 2002** • International learning exchange sparks exportation of the KIDS COUNT data-based advocacy model to Mexico and eventually to other countries in Latin America
- 2009** • First supplemental grants awarded to help state-level grantees do deeper work in specific policy areas
- 2011** • Decision to expand KIDS COUNT brand and to strengthen the network of child advocates
- 2011** • KIDS NET, a private, peer learning platform for state-level KIDS COUNT grantees, goes online
- 2012** • First freestanding KIDS COUNT policy report released
- 2012** • *KIDS COUNT Data Book* expands the number of indicators from 10 to 16 to provide a richer picture of child well-being aligned across four “domains” of a child’s life
- 2012** • First KIDS COUNT data snapshot released
- 2012** • Establishment of the Leadership Institute for State-Based Advocates
- 2014** • Launch of the online Advocacy Learning Lab
- 2014** • Release of first KIDS COUNT *Race for Results* report providing data disaggregated by race and policy recommendations to promote equitable opportunity for children of color

**IN 1990,** the Annie E. Casey Foundation published the first version of a national data book on children and called it KIDS COUNT. The idea was simple: If policymakers saw an accurate picture of where kids stood and what they needed, perhaps change would happen. And if states were ranked by outcomes, perhaps their leaders would be encouraged to outdo each other — and to do better by their youngest constituents.

A quarter century later, KIDS COUNT has evolved from that single data book to a powerful network and brand with an independent advocacy organization in every state, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico; a continuous stream of data and research products on the well-being of children; and a coordinated communications and capacity-building strategy that makes sure that information is heard. Through those many years of steady investment and expansion, the project has become a central platform for the Foundation to achieve its mission to build a brighter future for children, families and communities in the United States, as well as a resource for the larger field. KIDS COUNT serves as a learning laboratory, a sounding board, a launching pad and an echo chamber for work that influences public policy and practice affecting millions of young people.

Since its creation, KIDS COUNT has helped define the Casey Foundation as a data-driven organization committed to improving the lives of disadvantaged children. In a political environment that rarely prioritizes low-income children and families, KIDS COUNT has been a major vehicle

for building bipartisan support for proven solutions and policy change. “We know that legislatures have to make tough choices all the time and that they are balancing multiple priorities,” says Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Foundation. “They often have limited information about the condition of children or access to research about the most effective interventions. Without that information and effective advocates, kids wouldn’t have much chance when competing against other priorities.”

This report tells the story of KIDS COUNT and the insights the Foundation has gained into how the development of such a platform can shape and amplify policy on a broad scale. Those insights include:

- Stay the course; patient investing for the long term can pay off.
- Build a broad presence. A footprint that covers every state can create potent leverage for policy and practice change.
- Continuously strengthen the capacity of your network’s leaders while learning from them.
- Support your investment with the right staff and align activities within your organization.
- Don’t be afraid to expand the brand and diversify your offerings, even as you protect your gains.

In promoting more effective public policies, KIDS COUNT supports every programmatic interest of the Foundation, from child welfare and juvenile justice to family economic success. At the same time, the network has connected a powerful cadre of



*Data bring objectivity to anecdotal and ideology-based family policy discussions.*

*Playing to the natural competition among states gets attention and challenges policymakers to do better.*

child advocates whose capacity is strengthened with ongoing Foundation investments. In 2014 alone — 25 years after the KIDS COUNT project began — the KIDS COUNT network achieved policy wins in 33 states, resulting in \$8.3 billion in new or defended policy investments that will benefit an estimated 20.6 million children and more than 11 million families.

“KIDS COUNT is a critical mechanism that not only advances all of the work of our Foundation, but also serves as a resource for other advocates, organizations and policymakers working on behalf of children,” says Lisa Hamilton, who manages the initiative in her role as vice president of external affairs at Casey. “The network informs, amplifies and measures the power of our programmatic ideas. And if you can’t get the ideas out there, you can’t do as much good in the world.”

## Data for Decisions

In all of Casey’s efforts, trustees and staff strive to make decisions based on data and evidence. This commitment to data and measurable results started with the late James E. “Jim” Casey, who, along with his siblings, established the Foundation and named it after the widowed mother who raised them. One of the founders of UPS, Jim Casey strongly believed that measurement enhanced effectiveness and accountability — both in business and in improving outcomes for disadvantaged children.

The initial idea for KIDS COUNT was developed in the late 1980s, when the Annie E. Casey Foundation was just

emerging as a national philanthropy. The assets from Jim Casey’s estate transformed the Foundation from a moderate-sized operating institution, specializing in long-term foster care, into one of the nation’s largest philanthropies dedicated to helping all children have a bright future. Among the organizations the Foundation approached about helping realize this expanded vision was the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), founded by Tom Joe. At a time when the number of Foundation program officers was very small, CSSP professionals performed much of Casey’s philanthropic staff work.

CSSP staff observed a dearth of regular reports providing data on the status of children and an environment where anecdotes and ideology appeared to drive family policy. Frank Farrow, who now leads the center and was for a time director of the Casey Foundation’s community change initiatives, proposed the development of a wall chart that would have state-by-state measures of child well-being. Douglas W. Nelson, then deputy director of CSSP and later the president of the Casey Foundation, recalls: “I think it was Tom Joe’s notion that states are naturally competitive, and if you could rank or rate states compared to each other, you’d have a tool to get the public’s attention and maybe create an environment in which state policymakers would be challenged to do better.”

The Casey Foundation’s Board of Trustees, UPS colleagues of Jim Casey who were steeped in a corporate culture of measurement and accountability, embraced the idea of setting benchmarks for improving child outcomes and measuring progress toward

**“The ultimate goal of the KIDS COUNT project is to stimulate change for children by accurately portraying children’s needs.”**

*Overview from first KIDS COUNT Data Book 1990*



them annually. The board made a five-year commitment to support the production and distribution of an annual book with national and state data on indicators of child well-being. Casey provided support to the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), a nonprofit provider of data and analysis on population, health and the environment, to collect and review data with CSSP. Staff from the center and PRB identified 10 key measures of health, education and social and economic well-being that were consistent and comparable across states. While sticking to these indicators over time had its limitations and there would be changes, they believed the approach would create a consistent, clear picture of year-over-year trends.

## A Picture of Child Well-Being

In January 1990, CSSP published the first edition of the *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, which included one-page profiles for the nation, each state and Washington, D.C. The Casey Foundation’s aspirations for KIDS COUNT were stated in the report’s overview: “This book represents only a first step by the Foundation in developing a

more comprehensive and timely picture of American children and their families, both nationally and at the state and local level. The ultimate goal of the KIDS COUNT project is to stimulate change for children by accurately portraying children’s needs. It is only through increased knowledge of the ways in which policies, programs and services affect children and youth that we can more effectively spend taxpayers’ dollars and make kids count.”

Despite a modest plan for promoting and disseminating KIDS COUNT — CSSP staff hand stuffed and stamped those first data books around the center’s conference table — the report attracted a surprising amount of national and state-level attention. “We really had no certainty at that time about what the response was going to be,” says Nelson. “When we published that first report, the media interest in it, the governors’ interest in it, advocates’ interest in it — all indicated that this really was a powerful tool to compel people to stop and think about how states were doing by kids, how to set realistic goals and how you could learn from other states that were handling things better. We thought we were onto something.”





“One of the really important things about KIDS COUNT that we often overlook is that until it came along, the social sector did almost everything without any data — especially around children and youth. In the era of big data and evidence-based decision making, thank goodness for KIDS COUNT. They actually make the data usable, which makes KIDS COUNT even more relevant today than when it started.”

*Steve Patrick, Executive Director, The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions*

#### ORIGINAL 10 KIDS COUNT INDICATORS

- 1 Percentage of births with no early prenatal care
- 2 Infant mortality rate
- 3 Percentage of low-birthweight babies
- 4 Benefits as a percentage of the poverty threshold
- 5 Percentage of children in poverty
- 6 Percentage not graduating from high school
- 7 Teenage unemployment rate
- 8 Education expenditures per pupil
- 9 Percentage of births to teenage mothers
- 10 Juvenile incarceration rate



The first *Data Book* acknowledged that much more work was needed to realize KIDS COUNT's ambitious objectives, including "the support and development of state and local efforts to effectively compile and use such data." Later in 1990, the Casey Foundation issued a request for proposals (RFP) for state-level grantees to produce a local version of the national *Data Book*, which would provide a community-by-community picture of the well-being of children and families. The criteria for selection as a state-level KIDS COUNT grantee included a capacity to collect and manage data and an effective means of communicating findings to the news media, policymakers and other influential audiences.

In 1991, when the second *KIDS COUNT Data Book* was released, the Foundation awarded grants to eight state-level projects to collect and disseminate data on the status of children. The grantees included child advocacy organizations, research centers in universities and state government agencies. The following year the number of state-level grantees increased to 18, and by 1996 there was a KIDS COUNT grantee in every state and the District of Columbia with Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following several years later.

At both the national and state levels, the Foundation worked to continuously refine KIDS COUNT indicators. For example, an early KIDS COUNT measure for the national *Data Book*, the juvenile violent crime arrest rate, was dropped. The reason: States voluntarily provided data for this indicator to the federal government, but over time the quality of data from several states deteriorated. One state collected

violent crime statistics only from its largest city, skewing the results. There were data challenges for the state KIDS COUNT grantees, too. "When the first RFPs went out, the Foundation required the states to use the same indicators as the national *Data Book*," recalls Bill O'Hare, then the KIDS COUNT director at the Foundation. "A lot of those indicators were not available at the local level. The Foundation recognized that this was not a wise requirement for states and provided the states more latitude in developing indicators of child well-being."

There were other growing pains for KIDS COUNT, including concerns that the first *Data Book* did not account for race. Incremental improvements in identifying disparities in outcomes for children of color began with the second *Data Book*. A "United States Minority Profile" compared trend data in the KIDS COUNT indicators among white, African-American and Hispanic kids. In 1995, KIDS COUNT published a special report providing data on the social and economic well-being of Asian, Native American and Hispanic children.

The Foundation continued to strengthen KIDS COUNT's capacity to contribute to improving the life chances of all children, increasingly making data about racial disparities a regular feature of data books, policy reports and data snapshots. Still, it became clear that the Foundation needed to drill deeper into the data and tell the stories of how different populations of children were faring. In 2014, KIDS COUNT went further and created a new index for comparing kids' progress on key milestones across racial and ethnic groups with the report *Race for Results: Building a Path to*

**"We provided grants to people who knew in-state networks, knew the legislature, knew the governor, knew the politics and could use these data about their state — comparing counties, comparing cities, comparing what happened to black and Hispanic and white kids — to fuel advocacy for state-specific improvements."**

*Douglas W. Nelson, Retired President and CEO, The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

*Data often highlight where states aren't doing well and have room to improve. Adding solutions to such data gives advocates the opportunity for a more productive conversation with policymakers.*

*Opportunity for All Children* (April 2014), recommending policies to promote equitable opportunities for children, families and communities of color.

## A Platform for Advocacy

When Doug Nelson left CSSP to lead the Casey Foundation in May 1990, he and the Foundation's trustees focused on developing grant-making strategies that would help child welfare, juvenile justice and other public systems make more effective investments on behalf of disadvantaged kids. He also was charged with building a staff that could manage these reform initiatives on a large scale. With nonpartisan, data-driven demonstrations and advocacy emerging as key attributes of Casey's approach, KIDS COUNT became an internally managed Foundation project.

To make the annual *Data Book* a more effective tool for advocacy, the Foundation introduced a new feature in 1992: an essay with ideas for solutions that would lead to better outcomes for children. As the *Data Book* grew in prominence, these essays became a way to capitalize on the Foundation's most high-profile product, fortifying the powerful message of the data. They also served as a platform for launching new areas of philanthropic investment, such as responsible fatherhood. In 2003, the *Data Book* featured an essay focused on "The High Cost of Being Poor," which showed the impact on low-income families of "paying far too much for many of life's necessities." Charles Bruner, executive director of the Child & Family Policy Center in Iowa, the KIDS COUNT grantee in that state, said that the essay's data and examples

of best practice helped provide credibility to a successful policy initiative effectively ending the predatory practice of providing high-interest car title loans.

"The High Cost of Being Poor" essay highlighted an emerging area of Casey Foundation investment: increasing the ability of low-income families to provide economic security for their children. KIDS COUNT and the Foundation's work in family economic success had a catalytic impact on the movement to develop state and local policies that reduce the high cost of being poor. For example, with Casey support, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has held an annual meeting on opportunities for working families since 2002. Sessions on the high cost of being poor "inspired legislators to look at how policies could be strengthened," says Mary Fairchild, a senior fellow at NCSL. To cite one example of related changes, Pennsylvania's widely replicated Fresh Food Financing Initiative attracted supermarkets to underserved communities and reduced the cost of groceries for their residents.

The KIDS COUNT essay also provided a means of amplifying the policy impact of the Foundation's system reform initiatives. The essay in the 2008 *Data Book*, "A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform," documented the harm and waste caused by ill-informed juvenile justice practices and discussed new intervention strategies that responded effectively to delinquency. By that time, the Foundation's 15 years of experience with its Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) — which showed how jurisdictions could build safer, cheaper juvenile justice systems by locking



up fewer kids and spending the savings on more effective community-based programs — provided important experience to form the essay. Because of the essay and Foundation assistance, several KIDS COUNT grantees became more deeply involved in advocating for an unpopular and powerless segment of our society — behaviorally troubled, primarily poor, mostly teenagers of color who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

High-quality data on child well-being and rigorous research supporting recommendations have been essential to the success of KIDS COUNT. In the hands of a strong national network of state-level advocates who bring evidence and local stories to bear in policy discussions, the KIDS COUNT data have been instrumental in changing conversations on children's policy. "It wasn't just the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* that was important to legislators," says Tony Cipollone, who led Casey's evaluation and communications efforts for many years and is now president and CEO of the John T. Gorman Foundation. "It was also important who delivered it. If the book was coupled with a very credible advocate, then that helped."

The KIDS COUNT organizations understand their local policy environment, and an organization in a liberal state might craft different messages than one in a conservative state. "We have learned to trust our KIDS COUNT partners in being savvy about how they do their work," says Casey's Lisa Hamilton. "We also respect their ability to identify the best issues to push at a particular time."

Terry Haven, the KIDS COUNT director at Voices for Utah Children, used the release of the 2014 *Data Book* to talk with legislators about the increasing poverty rate in the state and the need for a two-generation strategy that helps parents gain economic security while putting their children on a path to opportunity. She also used a single KIDS COUNT indicator to point out how policy change has measurably benefited the state's children: "Over the past two decades, our teen and child death rate dropped by 37 percent," says Haven. "I focused on the notion that over the same period legislators have put into place and made the right decisions to do a graduated driver's license bill, a booster seat bill, a car seat bill and seat-belt bills. We were able to say: 'All of those things made driving safer for children, and the data say you made the right choice. You did what was right, and you helped kids.' The KIDS COUNT data are a road map that tells us where we have been and where we need to go, and it is a matter of whether we have the political will to get us there."

## KIDS COUNT 2.0

Twenty years after the publication of the first *Data Book*, the trustees and staff of the Casey Foundation could look back at KIDS COUNT with justifiable pride. Data-driven child advocacy had become a credible and powerful approach to making the moral, political and economic case for improving the future of all American children. Yet Jim Casey's notion of "constructive dissatisfaction" — that is, there is always a way to work smarter and more effectively — is a deeply embedded Foundation value.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

*Applying the "hub and spoke" model to child advocacy works — with high-quality data, rigorous research and the Casey Foundation's national presence as the hub, and a spoke system of strong state-level advocates.*



**“The KIDS COUNT data are a road map that tells us where we have been and where we need**

**to go.”** Terry Haven, KIDS COUNT Director,  
Voices for Utah Children

In 2010, the Foundation asked its state-level grantees, national policy partners and other organizations about ways of leveraging one of the Foundation’s most recognizable and influential initiatives. How could KIDS COUNT enhance child advocates’ policy impact? How could KIDS COUNT help bring evidence-based solutions to scale? From these conversations emerged a Foundation conviction that KIDS COUNT could deliver even greater value in persuading decision makers and other audiences to adopt what works to improve outcomes for all children.

Not surprisingly, the Foundation’s conversations and deliberations reaffirmed the importance of good data to KIDS COUNT’s credibility. To leverage the KIDS COUNT brand and increase the policy influence of its data, the Foundation revised the structure and content of the *Data Book* and expanded the national KIDS COUNT data products. The original 10 KIDS COUNT indicators in the *Data Book* emphasized children’s health and family economics. With new sources of data available, KIDS COUNT selected 16 indicators that provide a more balanced and robust picture of well-being across four “domains” of a child’s life: economic well-being, education, health and family and community. The new indicators and the organization of the data have made it easier for child advocates to target areas of concern and promote effective policy solutions.

An additional change in the national *Data Book* was elevating the essay into a new series of standalone KIDS COUNT reports that provide advocates, policymakers and

key decision makers with in-depth studies on specific issues. Leveraging the KIDS COUNT brand, new policy reports provided additional opportunities to cover more of the Foundation’s issues. These reports include specially developed national and state-by-state data sets, discussions of evidence-based programs and policy recommendations.

One of the first standalone special reports was *Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, which emphasized the importance of reading to children’s success in school and their lifelong earning potential. The release of *Early Warning* coincided with the 2010 launch of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a collaborative effort of foundations, nonprofits, government agencies, business leaders, states and communities to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career and active citizenship. State-level KIDS COUNT grantees, including the Georgia Family Connection Partnership and Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families, have been active in the campaign. One policy win for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT — and Rhode Island’s children — that aligned with the campaign was legislation funding school districts’ transition from part-day to full-day kindergarten.

KIDS COUNT policy reports also have contributed to federal policymaking. *Youth and Work: Restoring Teen and Young Adult Connections to Opportunity* showed that youth employment was at its lowest level since World War II and suggested ways of creating opportunities and building

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

*Policy reports and data snapshots provide “more bites at the apple,” resulting in greater likelihood of policy change.*

Patrick McCarthy, President and CEO, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

a stronger workforce for the future. A particular emphasis of the report was the fragmentation of systems supporting young people who are trying to stay in school or find employment. *Youth and Work* led to federal “performance partnerships” that allow states and localities to use funds flexibly from multiple federal programs serving low-income young people who are neither in school nor working. “Once we released the report,” says Patrice Cromwell, director of strategic initiatives at the Foundation, “we also launched a series of grants with partners to address some of the issues that the report identified.” The Aspen Forum’s Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund has been a key grantee helping to catalyze and advance local collaboratives for disconnected youth.

In 2012, KIDS COUNT added data snapshots. These snapshots are four-page reports that highlight specific indicators of child well-being. For example, “Reducing Youth Incarceration in the United States” analyzed newly available data to highlight the nationwide decline in confinement and provided recommendations for continuing this trend. “The policy reports and data snapshots have been an important development for KIDS COUNT,” says Casey President McCarthy. “Each year we now get multiple bites of the apple in terms of issues we care about.” The continuous products have meant substantial visibility for KIDS COUNT data, which now are mentioned frequently in the media.

To get even more out of its work and take advantage of new channels of communication, the Foundation created the KIDS COUNT Data Center (<http://datacenter.kidscount.org>).

It is an online resource that contains hundreds of key child and family well-being indicators and allows advocates, journalists, funders, researchers and others to easily generate customized community, state and national analyses. An online expression of the Foundation’s original vision of data-driven child advocacy, the Data Center includes contributions from all of the state-level KIDS COUNT organizations. “We are continually adding new data to the Data Center, which gives us a way to support and inform our audiences year round instead of only when we release a report,” says Laura Speer, associate director of policy reform and advocacy at the Casey Foundation. “The news media uses the Data Center regularly and has found it to be a valuable resource.” In 2016, the Data Center added a feature to allow users to more easily search for data on child and family well-being by race and ethnicity, as well as other characteristics such as age and family nativity.

## Strengthening the Network

By 2010, KIDS COUNT had become one of the Casey Foundation’s most enduring and effective investments. Beginning that year, and continuing today, the Foundation has preserved the “returns” of the initial investment by making commensurate investments in the capacity of KIDS COUNT organizations to deliver on their expanded and essential role in KIDS COUNT’s success. While other state and national partners, including other funders, support state policy advocacy, the Casey Foundation has a specific

### KEY TAKEAWAY

*A long-term investment should be supported with the right staff and activities aligned within your organization.*





## THE CURRENT KIDS COUNT INDICATORS

In 2012, the KIDS COUNT team worked with data and research partners to update KIDS COUNT indicators and group them into four domains. The current 16 indicators are:

### Economic Well-Being

- Children in poverty
- Children whose parents lack secure employment
- Children living in households with a high housing cost burden
- Teens not in school and not working

### Education

- Children not attending preschool
- Fourth graders not proficient in reading
- Eighth graders not proficient in math
- High school students not graduating on time

### Health

- Low-birthweight babies
- Children without health insurance
- Child and teen deaths per 100,000
- Teens who abuse alcohol or drugs

### Family & Community

- Children in single-parent families
- Children in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma
- Children living in high-poverty areas
- Teen births per 1,000



commitment to ensuring that state KIDS COUNT organizations can continue to weather transitions in leadership and stay current with key and emerging competencies in their field.

Having a network of high-performing child advocacy organizations to carry forward KIDS COUNT data and solutions is key to the effectiveness of the KIDS COUNT platform. That means KIDS COUNT grantees must not only excel in areas such as policy analysis, but also be effective nonprofit organizations. Working closely with KIDS COUNT grantees, the Foundation determined six core competency domains for effective child advocacy, from strategic leadership to ability to analyze and influence policy to incorporation of race equity and inclusion. To help KIDS COUNT grantees do their best work, the Foundation supports a wide range of technical assistance activities aimed at increasing their skills in each of these areas. A Capacity Indicator Self-Assessment allows organizational leaders and their boards to identify and prioritize their needs across these six competency areas.

For more than 20 years, the Foundation has been investing in leadership development programs to strengthen the skills of system and nonprofit leaders whose organizations serve children and families. Anticipating the retirement of many long-term executive directors in the network, the KIDS COUNT team worked with Casey's Talent and Leadership Development unit to establish the Leadership Institute for State-Based Advocates, an

18-month program specifically targeting cohorts of mid-career professionals from the KIDS COUNT network. "We felt that if we were going to preserve our investment in the network, we needed to grow and nurture the next generation of diverse, results-based leaders," says Jann Jackson, a senior associate on the Foundation's Policy Reform and Advocacy team.

With new leaders and new issues entering the work, the Foundation recognized the need to create a place for state advocates to easily obtain information and connect to peers. This new online portal, named the Advocacy Learning Lab (ALL), offers real-time access to specific tools, resources and technical assistance. ALL is organized to give advocates access to best-in-class assistance in each of the six competency areas. The site also serves as the platform for the Self-Assessment and directs users to resources to help them build skills in the areas where they need the most help.

The Foundation's technical assistance to the KIDS COUNT network also includes formal and informal access to leading experts specializing in child welfare, juvenile justice, budget and tax analysis and other topics. Most of the state partners in the network are multi-issue advocacy organizations with limited staff, making it challenging for them to stay current on the latest information and ideas in every field. "What we have been working on over the past several years," says McCarthy, "is encouraging the KIDS COUNT organizations to connect with some of the best research about what



**"Policy advocacy isn't an upward trajectory; it's a zigzag. A victory could be not losing ground. It's very countercultural for foundations."** *Bonnie Howard, Director, National Partnerships, Casey Foundation*



works for kids and families and linking them with some of the best organizations in the country on particular issues. It's a hub-and-spoke approach to spreading the most effective policy solutions."

## Measuring Success

Grant-making strategies aimed at influencing public policy are notoriously difficult to evaluate. The challenge is isolating the relative impact of the many different forces that lead to policy change. Progress does not always result from a set sequence of activities and sometimes victory means something not happening.

There are, however, a variety of ways to measure interim and long-term progress toward achieving KIDS COUNT's goals. These include quantifying both the demand for KIDS COUNT data products and their coverage in print, broadcast and online media; the amount of additional "investment" in KIDS COUNT from other funders; and the perceived credibility of KIDS COUNT advocates.

In 2015, for example, the Foundation's national KIDS COUNT reports garnered more than 4,200 media stories and 15.5 million social media mentions. This level of coverage provides tremendous visibility for children's issues with policymakers, practitioners and the public. Surveys of legislative staff, journalists and other key audiences have confirmed that KIDS COUNT is seen as a strong, credible resource. Staff at other foundations say they often use KIDS COUNT data to inform and strengthen their grant-making strategies and provide rationale

for specific grants. Having comparable, accurate data across states helps all foundations understand what policies will make the most difference on issues they care about.

The advocacy capacity of the KIDS COUNT state organizations has been useful to other funders, and, as a result, they have sought advice from Casey staff and invested in the work of KIDS COUNT organizations. For example, when a group of foundations started the State Priorities Partnership, a network that uses tax, revenue and budget analysis to inform state policies, they tapped into the existing state-level KIDS COUNT organizations, a number of whom continue to participate in both networks. In 2014, more than 200 individual, corporate, community foundation, private foundation and government donors supported state KIDS COUNT organizations.

Individual child advocates also use KIDS COUNT data to inform and strengthen their work. As Steve Patrick, executive director of The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, explains it, "When I was a local advocate working on policy change, KIDS COUNT was often the first data we turned to. It brought the most credibility. The data became the argument for why we were advocating for specific policy changes. It made the case for investment in our kids in New Mexico."




## WHAT MAKES A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE CHILD ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION?

- 1 Strategic leadership
- 2 Organizational stability
- 3 Strong data analysis
- 4 Strong policy analysis and influence
- 5 Strategic communication
- 6 Race equity and inclusion







With more than a quarter century of investments to influence an ever-changing policy landscape through its support of a powerful network of state advocates, there are many lessons that other funders can learn from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's investment in KIDS COUNT.

# insights

**BUILDING A MISSION-CRITICAL, LONG-TERM INVESTMENT**



### **STAY THE COURSE: PATIENT INVESTING FOR THE LONG-TERM CAN PAY OFF.**

Twenty-five years and counting is an unusually long foundation commitment to a single, large-scale program. Yet the length of that commitment reflects the long-term nature of policy change. It has allowed for continuous refinement of the KIDS COUNT platform so that it works on behalf of all program areas and provides the opportunity to develop deep relationships with state-level grantees, technical assistance providers and other partners. Long-term investment also requires periodic assessments that may update grant amounts or terms to reflect current realities and needs while preserving gains. KIDS COUNT organization grants have increased several times in recognition of increased network activities, communications goals and required time commitments for capacity building.

### **BUILD A BROAD PRESENCE: A FOOTPRINT THAT COVERS EVERY STATE CAN CREATE POTENT LEVERAGE FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGE.**

Private foundations have published reports on social and economic problems for almost as long as there have been such institutions. A durable, nimble network of state grantees, aligned with Casey's mission and issues, has created what Michael Lacey, director of policy reform and advocacy at the Foundation, calls KIDS COUNT's "secret sauce" — a potent mechanism for turning information into action. By supporting KIDS

COUNT organizations and amplifying KIDS COUNT messages, local funders and national partners have played an important role in policy successes.

### **CONTINUOUSLY STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITY OF YOUR NETWORK'S LEADERS WHILE LEARNING FROM THEM.**

While KIDS COUNT organizations have become part of a powerful brand that has benefited their work, it has been critical for them to maintain their independence as organizations and work on their own priorities for children. Grantees are asked to contribute local and state data to the KIDS COUNT Data Center and to promote the annual *Data Book* and one other report per year, so each organization can choose ideas that best align with its statewide agenda and political climate. Through a network steering committee and participation on planning committees for specific activities, the organizations inform KIDS COUNT work, learning and strategy.

### **SUPPORT YOUR INVESTMENT WITH THE RIGHT STAFF AND ALIGN ACTIVITIES WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION.**

KIDS COUNT is a significant enterprise, representing a Foundation commitment of more than \$128 million over 25 years. To produce the national data products, manage the network of grantees and supervise a broad range of technical assistance, the Casey Foundation currently employs five full-time data and policy



For a current list of KIDS COUNT network grantees, please see [www.aecf.org/work/kids-count/kids-count-network/](http://www.aecf.org/work/kids-count/kids-count-network/)

professionals who work on the project and relies on significant contributions from the Foundation's Strategic Communications staff. Through regular cross-Foundation policy meetings, KIDS COUNT and program staffers work together continuously on messages and priorities for KIDS COUNT publications.

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO EXPAND THE BRAND AND DIVERSIFY YOUR OFFERINGS, EVEN AS YOU PROTECT YOUR GAINS.** KIDS COUNT has been a “success” from the publication of the first national *Data Book*. But fully realizing the potential of the data-driven advocacy to promote policy change has required

ongoing modification of the initiative and stretching to the next level. Standalone policy reports, data snapshots and the creation of the KIDS COUNT Data Center made sure the project seized the opportunities of new communications channels as they evolved and kept pace with the ways key audiences consume information. At the same time, attention to fundamentals such as succession planning and continuous skill building has been key to ensuring the strength of the core platform.

## Conclusion

Over its quarter-century evolution, KIDS COUNT has shown how powerfully a single philanthropic investment can expand into a mission-critical platform. In so doing, it has advanced the well-being of children across the Casey Foundation's areas of interest, from creating economic opportunity to building strong families and communities. Unfortunately, poverty and the poor outcomes that often accompany it still stand in the way of opportunity for too many children. Disaggregated data that paint a truly accurate picture of the well-being of children by race can still be difficult to collect. But KIDS COUNT has demonstrated that a foundation can establish a mechanism for tackling complex social problems that remains both durable and ready to respond, while establishing a resource to empower all who care about making change for children.



## ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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